Breaking Analysis: Coronavirus - Advice on Running Digital Events  by, David Vellante

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Coronavirus – Advice on Running Digital Events.  Note: Since the date of this report much has changed and our industry is assuming no travel and no f2f contact. Until further notice theCUBE is operating in an all-remote digital format using its call-in video platform. ETR is updating its spending outlook and surveying on the impact [...]

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ETR is updating its spending outlook and surveying on the impact of COVID19 but those results wont be ready for a while. In this Breaking Analysis we’re going to take a break from our traditional spending assessments and share with you our advice on how to deal with the coronavirus crisis; and specifically best practices in shifting your physical event to digital.

theCUBE team is in active discussions with over twenty companies who have events planned in the near term...and the inbound call volume has been increasing rapidly. We have been doing digital for a decade and have lots of experience in this field so we’re excited to share our learnings, tools and best practices with you.

Unchartered Waters

We haven’t ever seen a country quarantine 35 million people. So of course everyone is panicked by this uncertainty but our message, like others is don’t panic but be decisive – you have to act and make decisions. This reduces uncertainty for your stakeholders, employees and community.

Situational Analysis - PANIC!

- COVID-19 is like nothing we’ve ever seen
- Major physical events dropping fast
- Little choice but to cancel live attendees for near-term events
- Three choices:
  a. Cancel the event completely and wait until next year
  b. Postone and be in limbo indefinitely
  c. Pivot to digital

Key Question: What’s the most important aspect(s) of your physical event that you’d like to preserve?

Build a “Digital Twin” of those components

As you well know, major physical events are dropping fast as a risk mitigation measure. Mobile World Congress and HIMSS cancelled, Kubecon postponed, IBM Think has gone digital and so it goes.

If you have an event in the next 3-5 weeks you have little choice but to cancel the physical attendee portion of your event. Now you have really three choices here in our view:

1. One is to cancel the event completely and wait until next year. The problem with this is that capitulation doesn’t preserve any of the value related to why you were holding the event in the first place.
2. You can do what Kubecon did and postpone. Ok…that is a near term decision on the event but now you’re in limbo for a while…That’s ok if you can sort out a venue down the road that may work.
3. The third option is to pivot to digital. This requires more thought but it allows you to create an ongoing content arc that will have downstream benefits to your business.

The number one complaint brands tell us about physical events is that after the event they don’t capitalize on a post-event halo effect. A digital strategy that spans time will enable that. This is important because when the market calms down you will be able to better leverage digital for your physical events.

Where Should you to Start Digital Planning?

The key question you want to ask is what are the most important aspects of your physical event that you want to preserve. And then start thinking about building a digital twin of those areas. But it’s much more than that and we will address the opportunity that is unfolding for you.

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Your challenge right now is to act decisively and turn lemons into lemonade with Digital.

Content, People and Community – A Virtuous Digital Circle

Experiences are built around content, community and the interaction of people. Its a virtuous cycle where data and machine intelligence will drive insights, discovery by users will bring navigation which leads to engagement and ultimately outcomes.

theCUBE Belief System: Experience is built around the interaction of people, content and community

Very importantly...this is not about which event software package to use. Do not start there. Start with the outcome you want to achieve, identify the parts of that outcome that are achievable and work backwards from there. The technology decision will be easier and more effective if you take that path.
Shelter in Place Requires All-Remote Productions (for now)

The shelter in place orders in Santa Clara County and Massachusetts, as well as other parts of the world, have required us to go all remote until further notice. There are several considerations when setting up a remote interview. Jeff Frick, General Manager of theCUBE, created a Public Service Announcement (PSA) video, which includes best practices for remote interviews.

Below are some examples of the look and feel of remote interviews with some format options:

Currently all our Digital Productions use theCUBE’s Remote Studio Capability

Go Forward, Cancel or Go Digital?

At high level you have two paths when travel and face-to-face contact becomes acceptable. The real issue is your audience is going to be fearful until a vaccine is developed – or at the very least – everyone can be tested with accurate contact tracing in place. This could take 12-18 months:

1. The preferred path if your event is coming up soon is pivot to digital as shown on the right side of the chart below; or
2. Hold your physical event but be aware your lawyers are going to be all over you about the risks and precautions you need to take. And it’s likely your physical audience will be a fraction of historical attendance.
There are others more qualified to advise you on risk management and the specific live event precautions you should take, but we’ve listed some items on the left side of the chart above.

Nonetheless, we are suggesting for near term events, that you optimize for digital. We advise:

- Send a crisp, clear and simple communications – Adobe has a good example...that asks your loyal community to opt-in up for updates and start the planning for digital.
- Identify the key objectives of your event and build a digital program that maximizes value for attendees that maps to those objectives. [See some examples below in which that theCUBE participated this week].
- Event software should come last – don’t even worry about that until you’ve envisioned your outcome. We’ll cover event software and tools later on in this analysis.

Old Way / New Way

We believe new thinking is required and the digital learnings in the next several months will lead to a permanent change. Event hosts are entering a new era and our experience suggests they will find new value which will permanently alter their thinking. Going forward, we believe event organizers will put much more emphasis on hybrid physical / digital events where the digital component is no longer a bolt-on, but rather a fundamental driver of value for self-forming communities.

The old way was big venue, big bang event, thousands of people, spending tons of money on a band, exhibitor halls, etc. Rather event hosts are re-setting the physical and optimizing for Digital. Which really is about serving a community.

Re-Imagining Events

The pattern emerging with our clients is they want to preserve five key content areas from physical events. Not necessarily all of them but some combination.

1. First is **keynotes.** You bring together a captive audience of customers and they want to hear from
execs. Your customers made a bet on you and they want to feel good about it. So one...is keynotes.

2. Another element is the **breakout sessions**...the deeper dives from subject matter experts.

3. **Technical sessions.** A big reason customers attend events is to get technical training.

4. **Press conference or news.** Events almost always have big news and holding press/analyst events within the events activates coverage and engagement.

5. **theCUBE.** Many of our customers have said we not only want you to turnkey a digital event, we want theCUBE...or, alternatively, we want to plug theCUBE into the digital production that we are running.

Now these are not in stone – for example some customers are blending keynotes into their press conference. And we would to stress that initially - everyone's mind set is replicating physical to digital. It's fine to start there but there's way more to the story, which we'll try to flesh out a bit later in this analysis.

### Some Examples of Digital Event Successes

**The Digital Press Event**

Let’s look at some simple examples that we’ve executed on recently. First, take a look at a digital event we did this week with Aviatrix. They're a small company but they wanted to convey a brand image that garnered attention and underscored how they punch above their weight class.

You can see the live audience vibe above- this event was live but it can be pre-recorded. All the speakers were together in one place, yes... but you can see the high production value.

We call this out because some of our clients have said they want to do digital as a completely remote event, with speakers 100% distributed due to travel restrictions. Our feeling is that's much more challenging for high value events.

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Our strong recommendation is plan to get speakers into a physical venue. And ideally gather a small VIP / influencer audience to create an emotional connection.
Make your audience feel important with the vibe of a VIP event. If you can, wait a few weeks to see how this thing shakes out and if and when travel loosens you can pull that off with a professional look and feel.

**Keynotes and Breakout Sessions**

Below is an example of a digital event we held when we opened our new Palo Alto studios. You can see the production value and the live audience.

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**Preserve Digital Keynotes and Breakouts**

Ideally, same look and feel for the keynotes on the same day...

There are options:

1. Run Live on the same day
2. Pre-record & run as a simulive by inserting into the live or simulive stream
3. Run keynotes or press conference live and pre-record breakouts

This was a less expensive production than the Aviatrix example, which had a bigger venue food, music for the intros and outros, high end audio and visual, etc. The higher end production requires more budget – think at least $200 to $300K thousand and upwards of $400K for a full blown event that invites influencers and invests in more paid media and syndication.

You have options. You can scale it down...host the event at your facility, host it at our facility in Palo Alto, use your own people for the studio audience, use your own production people and dial back the glam, which will lower the costs. It just depends on the brand you want to convey and your budget.

As well you can run the event live or as a simulive. You can pre-record some or all of the segments. You can have a portion – like the press conference and or the keynotes run live and then insert the breakouts into the stream as simulive or on demand assets. Again, there are options.

**Best Practice – Women in Data Science (WiDS)**

Before we dig into technical sessions, we want to share another best practice. theCUBE this week participated in a digital event at Stanford with the Women in Data Science organization where we plugged theCUBE into their platform and agenda.
WiDS is amazing. They created a hybrid physical / digital event – again with a small group of VIPs and speakers on site at Stanford – with keynotes, breakouts & theCUBE interviews all streaming. What was really cool is they connected to dozens of outposts around the globe who hosted in regions shown above with intimate meetups that participated in the live event. Of course all the content is hosted on-demand for that post-event halo effect we always emphasize.

Technical Sessions and Training

We want to talk a bit about technical sessions. Whereas with press conferences and keynotes we are recommending a higher scale and strong brand production, with technical sessions we see a different approach working.

Technical people are fine with ear buds and laptop speakers. You don’t need the high end production for tech talks. Below we show an example of a technical talk that Dan Hushon has run. Dan is an SVP and CTO at DXC and for years has run his technical sessions using the CrowdChat platform. He uses the free community edition with Google hangouts and has run dozens and dozens of these tech talks, designed for learning and collaboration.
Technical people love to participate in these, chat, vote and the beauty is, unlike a Twitter chat which is ephemeral, a transcript and record of the event is created for easy on-demand viewing of the video and chat conversations.

You can run these weekly, as part of the pregame of your digital event, run some day of event and continue the cadence post event.

Don’t Let the Software Tail Wag the Dog

Let’s spend some time on event software. There are lots of tools out there. Some are really functional, some are monolithic and bloated, some are emerging...and you may have some of these licensed or be wed to one. Webinar software like On24, Brightcove and other platforms are popular. That’s great. From our standpoint we plug right into any platform and are agnostic to the event software. But the key is not to allow your software to dictate the outcome of your digital event – technology should serve outcomes not the reverse.

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theCUBE’s Philosophy on Digital Event Tools – Free & Scaleable

We want to share theCUBE’s approach to software.

First – our software is free. We offer community editions that are extremely robust - i.e. not neutered - which we have made available to our community. We use a cloud native, horizontally scalable model, bringing to bear the right tool for the right job. What does this mean?

Think of AWS. You log into a console and you spin up services based on what you need. Those services each have granular functions, APIs and primitives. They’re optimized for a specific job. RedShift for analytic databases, S3 for object, EBS for block, Kinesis for streaming, Aurora for relational. It’s not one size fits all.
You spin up the service you need, consume resources only when needed and then spin it down. No perpetual license, no twelve month forced license/subscription models... just services optimized for a specific task.

Whether it’s live streaming, hosting content on demand, engaging the crowd in chats, transcribing/searching/curating/sharing video, telling stories post event, amplifying content... we try to visualize community as an organic whole and serve them. Also, presence is critical in a digital event – “oh hey – I see you’re here – great let’s connect and chat.”

There are a number of use cases and we encourage you to consult with us as to how to keep it simple. We have some really simple MVP use cases that we are happy to share with you.

What’s more, we don’t think of software to just hold the content, rather we think about members of the community and our goal is to allow teams to form and be successful.

We also see digital events creating new or evolving roles in organizations where the event may end but the social organization and community aspect lives on. Think of the CUBE as providing a membrane to the conference team and a template for organizing and executing digital events.

Whether it’s engaging the crowd in chats, curating video, telling stories post event, hosting content, amplifying content... visualizing your community as a whole and serving them is the goal. Presence is critical in a digital event – oh hey – I see you’re here – great let’s talk. There are a number of use cases and I encourage you to consult with us as to how to keep it simple. We have a really simple MVP use case that we are happy to share with you.

**Looking Ahead – Coronavirus Accelerates Digital Realities**

We see a permanent change. That’s not a prediction about coronavirus - rather we see a transformation creating new new dynamics. Digital is about groups which are a proxy for communities. Successful online communities require new thinking and we see new roles emerging.
Think about the “event stack protocol” today. Venue selection, agenda, call for speakers, registration, production, bands, breakouts, food, sponsors, exhibits and so forth. Think about how this is changing. Today it’s very clear who is in charge of what as decision making is dominated by the physical.

We see a different future. For example, a digital event may involve multiple venues (a la WiDS), many runs of show, remote pods, rules and tools around who is speaking when, on-line presence, self forming schedules and communities. As digital becomes more prominent and the value is more obvious, the balance between physical and digital will shift.

We think digital moves us to a persistent commitment where the group collective catalyzes collaboration. Hosting an online event is cool – but a long term digital strategy doesn’t just move physical to digital...rather it reimagines events as an organic entity...not a mechanism or a piece of software. It’s not just about hosting content - Digital communities have an emotional impact that must be reflected through your brand.

theCUBE’s Role

Our mission at theCUBE has always been to serve communities with great video content that educates and inspires. That mission is evolving to provide the tools, infrastructure, data and experiences for communities to extract value, self-govern and improve their collective careers.

Even though these times are uncertain, we are here to serve you. We’ll make the time to consult with you and are excited to share what we’ve learned over ten years of co-creating and collaborating with our sponsors and community.

As always we really appreciate the comments on our LinkedIn posts and on Twitter @dvellante so thanks for that. Remember these episodes are also available as podcasts. Please let us know what you’re thinking about digital events and let’s evolve this model together.

Watch the Full Video Analysis:
David Vellante is co-CEO of SiliconANGLE Media, as well as co-founder and Chief Analyst at The Wikibon Project, the world’s leading open source technology research community. Dave is a long-time tech industry analyst, entrepreneur, writer and speaker. As co-host of theCUBE – “The ESPN of Tech,” Vellante has interviewed over 5,000 experts since 2010. He is also a co-founder of CrowdChat, an angel funded startup based in Palo Alto using big data techniques to extract business value from social data. Prior to these exploits, Dave founded a CIO consultancy and spent a decade growing and managing IDC’s largest business unit. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife and four children where he is active in town activities including serving as the president of his town’s local “Kiddie Sports” association. Dave holds a B.S. in Applied Mathematics from Union College.

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